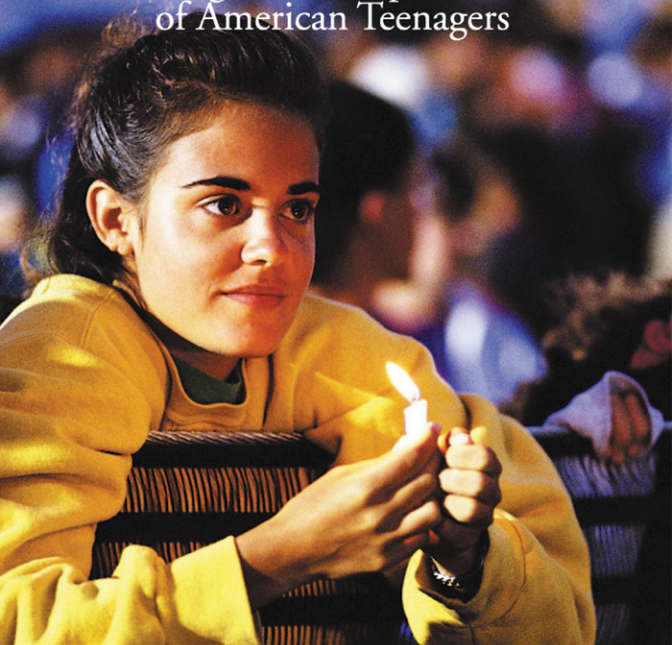


SOUL SEARCHING

The Religious and Spiritual Lives
of American Teenagers



Christian Smith
with Melinda Lundquist Denton

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CHRISTIAN SMITH

With Melinda Lundquist Denton

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For Emily Jean
C.S.S.

For my parents, Gregg and Virginia Lundquist
M.L.D.

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Introduction

AMERICAN TEENAGERS CAN embody adults' highest hopes and most gripping fears. They represent a radiant energy that opens doors to the future for families, communities, and society. But they also evoke deep adult anxieties about teen rebellion, trouble, and broken and compromised lives. Parents, teachers, and youth workers behold their teenagers with pride, hope, and enjoyment, but also often worry, distress, and frustration. How are our teenagers doing in life? What is happening to our relationships with them? How will they turn out? Happy and responsible? Troubled and depressed? Or worse? Such personal ambivalent feelings about teenagers are amplified in the discourse and images that animate our culture and institutions. Our youth, it is often said, are the future, our hope for a brighter world. Teenagers are exciting, zany, inventive, fun. We adults love them dearly, we tell ourselves, and would do anything to make their lives happy and full. And yet, adults see and fear in adolescence a dark side as well. Surly indifference and defiance. Dangerous peer pressure. Parties. Foolish choices. Drugs. Drunk driving. Crime. Pregnancy. Abortions. AIDS. Suspensions. School dropouts. School shootings. Suicide. So, many adults worry deeply that, whatever good there is, something may also be profoundly wrong about the lives of American teenagers.

Some adults attempt to respond. Parents make efforts to talk to their kids more often, to be more involved in their lives, to involve them in sports, clubs, camps, and other constructive activities. Communities set up youth centers and organize afterschool programs. School boards incorporate char-

acter education and community service into their curricula. And foundations and philanthropies sponsor studies and issue reports and recommendations to improve adolescent well-being. Many of these are worthy efforts, but in all of this there is often a missing element. In many discussions and activities revolving around better understanding and helping teenagers, one aspect of their lives seems frequently to go unnoticed, unconsidered, unexamined. That is their religious and spiritual lives. Very few efforts to better understand American adolescents take seriously their religious faith and spiritual practices. This is a curious neglect. Many teenagers, as this book shows, are very involved in religion. They say on surveys, at least, that their religious beliefs and practices are important parts of their lives. They feel good about the religious congregations they belong to. Many say that faith provides them with guidance and resources for knowing how to live well. To adequately comprehend the lives of American teenagers, it therefore seems important to understand their religious and spiritual beliefs, commitments, practices, experiences, and desires. And yet, so few of us do. In fact, reading many published overview reports on adolescence can leave one with the distinct impression that American youth simply *do not have* religious and spiritual lives.¹

This book is a response to that situation, intended to help develop a better scholarly and public understanding of the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents. The following chapters lay out the main survey and interview findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, a unique research project on the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents conducted from 2001 to 2005 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. What follows provides solid answers to questions about the character of teenage religion, the extent of spiritual seeking among youth, how religion affects adolescent moral reasoning and risk behaviors, and much more. We hope that by informing readers about the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers we will help to foster discussions in families, religious congregations, community organizations, and beyond, not only about the general state of religion in the United States, but also about cultural and institutional practices that may better serve and help to care for America's teens.

The vast majority of research in the sociology of religion in the United States focuses on either religious institutions or on adults, age 18 and older, and many scholars who study adolescents neglect religion in their lives. This inattention to youth religion works to our detriment. American adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 represent about 14 percent of all Americans, a population deserving the scholarly attention of sociologists of religion as much as any other group. Furthermore, because adolescence represents a crucial developmental transition from childhood to adulthood, research on teens can disclose important knowledge about religious socialization and change in the life course. Adolescents compose a population that many religious organizations, both congregations and parachurch ministries, target to exert influence in their lives. Adolescence and young adulthood are also life stages when religious conversion is likely to take place. Adolescence furthermore

provides a unique opportunity to study religious influences on family relationships, peer interactions, risk behaviors, media use, mental and emotional well-being, and many other outcome variables. Finally, adolescence provides an ideal baseline for longitudinal research on religious influences in people's lives. There is thus a great deal of value in pursuing a big-picture, in-depth study of youth religion and spirituality in the United States.

But such a study of the religion and spirituality of youth also affords an important and distinctive window through which to observe and assess American religion as a whole. A variety of recent studies have made diverse claims about the character and transformation of American religion. Some scholars have observed that American religion has recently become profoundly diverse, inundated by waves of new immigrants greatly expanding the demographic pluralism of American faiths.² Other scholars suggest that American religion has become culturally individualistic and subjectivistic, driven by religious "seekers" bearing consumerist mentalities about faith.³ Some writers claim that American youth have become deeply alienated from traditional institutional religion and are either opting out of faith altogether or are on quests to construct more authentic, postmodern versions of faith and spirituality.⁴ Along these lines, some suggest that American religion generally is losing the coherence of historical religious traditions, as individuals increasingly create personal, bricolage spiritualities, eclectically mixing and matching spiritual practices from diverse faiths.⁵ Some suggest that religion is really a marginal factor in the lives of American teenagers, not central to their real problems and concerns.⁶ Yet others observe a growing movement among American youth returning to religious tradition, liturgy, and historical orthodoxy.⁷ These are all potentially important observations. But do we really know enough to be sure that these reports accurately describe the character of American religion today?

One way to try to address these issues and questions is through a nationally representative study of American youth. Many of these accounts tell their stories in distinctly generational terms, suggesting that American baby boomers first opened the door to profound religious changes and that younger generations now drive the cutting edge of fundamental religious transformation in America. Of all Americans, youth are often said to be the most intensely exposed to and engaged with the digital and interactive communication technologies that are thought to be transforming American culture.⁸ Many claim that youth are particularly influenced by a contemporary postmodern culture that profoundly reconfigures understandings of knowledge, belief, and moral reasoning.⁹ Youth are sometimes thought to have the shallowest roots in the substance of their own historical religious traditions, knowing or caring the least about the distinctive content of their own faiths, and so quite open to alternative viewpoints.¹⁰ We also know that they are the target of intense, sophisticated, secular, mass consumer advertising campaigns trying to secure the brand loyalties of a consumer generation with hefty disposable income, and that this significantly shapes their values and assumptions.¹¹

For these and other reasons, we might expect American teenagers to serve as excellent indicators of possible developing trends in American religion more broadly. If many of the striking claims noted above are in fact prevalent in the American religious field, we would expect to see them evident among American adolescents. If we do not find them among American adolescents, that might cast some doubt on the claims. This book thus represents in part an attempt to describe and evaluate the shape and texture of American religion broadly by viewing it through the lens of the religious and spiritual practices of religious and nonreligious American youth. The pages that follow do not engage in hypothesis testing per se but seek to use recent claims about profound changes under way in American religion as sensitizing questions and framing devices in our analyses. In this way, we may learn a great deal not only about adolescent religion and spirituality specifically—which is very important in itself—but also about American religion more broadly.

In this book, we report the findings from research conducted by the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR; see www.youthandreligion.org). From July 2002 to March 2003, the NSYR conducted a national, random-digit-dial telephone survey of U.S. households containing at least one teenager age 13–17, surveying one household parent for about 30 minutes and one randomly selected household teen for about 50 minutes. Then, in the spring and summer of 2003, 17 trained project researchers conducted 267 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a subsample of telephone survey respondents in 45 states. The locations of each of these interviews are shown in figure 1.



Figure 1. Locations of NSYR Personal Interviews (N = 267).

These interviews were sampled to capture a broad range of difference among U.S. teens in religion, age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, rural-suburban-urban residence, region of the country, and language spoken (English or Spanish). To our knowledge, this project has been the largest, most comprehensive and detailed study of American teenage religion and spirituality conducted to date (specifics on the NSYR research methods are reported in Appendixes B and C). Altogether, the data collected provide for a dependable, representative description and analysis of the contours and character of adolescent religion and spirituality in the United States today. We address all of the major American religious traditions and two minority religious traditions, Mormonism and Judaism, although the majority traditions receive disproportionate attention in the analysis. Other NSYR researchers will also be publishing books and reports dedicated to better understanding the religious and spiritual lives of U.S. teenagers in minority religious traditions and in specific Protestant denominations.¹²

Here is what to expect in coming chapters and how to read them. Chapter 1 begins laying out some key themes of this book by considering the stories of two Baptist girls whom we personally interviewed. Chapter 2 examines extensive, nationally representative survey findings on the religious and spiritual identities, affiliations, beliefs, experiences, and practices of U.S. adolescents. Chapter 3 focuses on three specific groups of American teenagers—"spiritual seekers" who are "spiritual but not religious," teens who are entirely disengaged from religion, and religiously devoted teenagers—to better understand who these teens are. Chapter 4 explores in much greater depth American adolescents' thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about and experiences of religious faith and spirituality, drawing extensively on our personal interviews. Our purpose in chapter 4 is to elaborate from adolescent discourse many of the central themes and perspectives that define religion and spirituality for the majority of teenagers, while also paying attention to minority and alternative ideas and viewpoints among youth. Chapter 5 explores some of the major social forces and factors that form the lives of U.S. youth, seeking from a sociological perspective to better understand our society's structures and systems that may significantly shape the religious and spiritual lives of teenagers. Chapter 6 zeros in on one religious group of teens, focusing on the question of why U.S. Catholic teenagers as a whole rather consistently score lower on the religiosity measures of this study. Chapter 7 addresses the question of how religious practices associate with different outcomes in adolescents' lives. There we examine evidence suggesting that greater religiosity is significantly associated with more positive adolescent life outcomes and seek to reflect theoretically why and how this is so. The chapters are meant to fit together in order but can also, with the exception of chapters 4 and 5, which depend on each other to portray a bigger picture, be read independently. The conclusion summarizes and elaborates on our findings.

The religious and spiritual lives of U.S. teenagers are complicated. That complication is evident in the general flow of this book, which moves from

a fairly positive initial perspective to a more critical tone by its middle and then back to a paradoxically positive viewpoint by its end. We hope our analyses, findings, and stories together provide an understanding of American adolescents more reliable and rich than we have enjoyed to date so as to provoke better-informed conversations among people who care about teenagers' lives in all of their concerns and complexities.

1

Two Baptist Girls

ISAT SLEEPILY in my car waiting in the public library parking lot for 10 A.M. to arrive, the appointed time for my interview with a 16-year-old girl from this small mountain town in a Middle Atlantic state. Her name was Joy, according to my paperwork.¹ I had called her and her parents a few weeks before to ask if she would do a personal interview with me for a large research project I was conducting on American teenagers. They agreed, and we made arrangements to meet at their town's public library. So here I was, quite tired. The previous afternoon and evening I had conducted two interviews with teenagers in two other states, then caught a few hours' sleep at a highway hotel, and in the morning drove a few more hours on winding country roads to this mountain hamlet to meet with Joy. But I was also excited. Both of my interviews had gone very well. When I finished with Joy in a few hours, I had yet another interview scheduled that afternoon a few hours' drive away. Four teen interviews, three states, in 26 hours. Not bad.

Ten minutes before the hour, an old gray sedan pulled into the lot and parked a few spots away from me. Looking discreetly through the car windows between us, I saw what appeared to be an old man and a young girl waiting in their car. I was pretty sure it was my contacts, although not certain. A number of old and young people were also gathering, waiting for the library doors to open. I double-checked to make sure all my digital recording equipment was in order. At 10:00 I got out and locked my doors. The man and girl got out of their car. Our eyes met in the tentative way that strangers who have arranged to meet each other in public often do. "Hello, are you

Joy?” I asked. Yes sir, she said. We shook hands, awkwardly. “Thanks so much for agreeing to do this interview. I appreciate your time and help.” “Sure thing,” Joy said. “Well,” Joy’s stepfather told me, “I hope your study is gonna help us understand kids better a’cause we got us a problem here. Teens all around here is drinking booze and doin’ drugs. It’s a real pest.” I gave a look of concern. “But my Joy here ain’t into that stuff, are you, Joy? At least, you better *not* be, girl,” he announced to us both, jokingly. Joy laughed lightly, shaking her head—whether to say “Of course not” or in ridicule of the man I could not tell. Strolling toward the library, I commented on what a nice town theirs was. “Oh, yeah, this a real nice place to live,” agreed Joy’s stepfather, “though the economy’s been on hard times lately.” From the parking lot high on a hill, he pointed out below what had been Joy’s middle school and on another hill the large garage of a famous NASCAR driver. I had to confess I hadn’t heard the racer’s name before. “Okay, Joy, you have fun and I’ll come back in a few hours to pick you up.” I thanked him for his help, then Joy and I disappeared into the library, making our way to the staff meeting room I had reserved for this interview.

JOY, SUFFERING, AND HOPE

Joy sat patiently at the conference table as I set up my recording equipment, smiling as I made small talk. I explained to her the standard ground rules of the interview: there are no right or wrong answers, I only want to have a conversation to better understand her life, all of her answers are confidential, she can refuse to answer any question she’s not comfortable with, and so on. No problem, she said. Now, facing Joy, I could see she was not blessed with features reflecting cultural standards of physical beauty: she has bad teeth, impossible hair, and acne. Those kinds of genes can’t help any teen, I thought to myself.

We started off talking about her family. Joy lives with her mother and stepfather in her maternal grandmother’s house. Grandma owns the place, so there’s no rent to pay, but, Joy noted, “what Grandma says, goes.” Joy has one brother, two stepbrothers, and five stepsisters, who live all over the East Coast. Her mom, she says, is “not stable enough” to work; she has “a bad problem with keeping concentration.” Her stepfather, Rudy, no longer does bricklaying work because of a lung problem that has him on disability. They barely pay bills with Rudy’s disability check and some kind of child support from the state. Joy said she wants to get a job to earn some money, but Rudy won’t let her: “He wants to do everything himself.” Work would also require Joy to get a driver’s license, which her parents oppose, “ ’Cause they know then I’d never be home. Plus they know I’m probably going to drive pretty wild, they know me that way.” Joy tells me she loves her mother and Rudy, but she doesn’t feel close to them and they don’t get along well. She does not share any personal concerns or feelings with either of them. “Sometimes,” she remarks, “when Rudy gets ill about something, he just takes it out on everyone. He gets in a bad mood and goes off in another room and won’t

speak, and if you try to talk to him he gets ill.” Rudy also does not like Joy’s real brother, she continues, because he was kicked out of the Army for doing drugs. Doesn’t sound like the greatest family situation, I think to myself.

What kinds of people, I ask, is Joy friends with? “I got, I guess you’d say, grungy friends and crazy friends. They like to do wild stuff or whatever.” What kind of wild stuff? “Drugs and partying and stuff.” What do you mean by “grungy”? “They do drugs and they’re sorta, talk about suicide and stuff like that a lot. I try to help them out but some haven’t gotten help.” What, I ask, does Joy do with her friends? “Go over to their house, just sit around and watch movies or MTV, and if we go out we just go to parties and stuff like that.” What they watch, she says, depends partly on what’s on the satellite dish. There are no shopping malls or movie theaters in town or nearby. Is there any type of teen, I inquire, that she is not friends with? “People who think they’re better than everybody else. I just can’t stand that. As long as they respect me, I’ll be friends.” I ask how well her parents know her friends. They know some of them, but they don’t know she has suicidal friends; she keeps them well separated by telling them not to come over to her house. “My parents don’t know me that well,” Joy explains. “I don’t tell them a lot of stuff that I do, like go out and party and do drugs and drink and stuff like that.” Did she wish that her parents knew her better? “Not really,” she says.

I remark to Joy again about how financially tight their family must be with nobody working. “Well,” she notes, “my \$757 child support that I was getting from my dad went out, because he died last April.” Your dad died last April? Joy explains:

When I moved here from living with him, a lot of people say he was abusive, and he did hit my mom and my brother but he never hit me, so I can’t say nothing bad about him. And when I moved in with my mom and Rudy we went to court over child custody and Dad got custody of my brother and my mom got custody of me, and they asked me if I wanted visitation rights and I said yeah. So, then we had to meet somewhere and then Rudy, I guess he just didn’t like it, so I didn’t for, it had been probably five or six years since I’d seen my dad. Just never saw him. Then he died.

How, I asked, did that make her feel? “It hurt me because I had to go next state to see him, and his mother told me that all he wanted before he died was to see me. And I couldn’t see him.” That’s very sad, I said. I’m sorry. “Uh-huh. Everybody thought he was a troublemaker so Rudy didn’t want him around and told him if he came here and was acting crazy and stuff he’d call the law.” She continued: “When my dad died, I just kind of drifted off. I blamed them for a lot of it because they wouldn’t let me see him.” She’s somewhat angry, she explains, but doesn’t really hate her parents because she knows they were trying to do what they thought best.

Had there been any other major turning points in her life? “I changed a lot when I went into ninth grade.”

'Cause I met one of my little grungy friends that tried to commit suicide all the time. I met him a week before he tried it the first time, before I knew he did anything. I didn't even know he was trying to commit suicide, and a week after I met him he wasn't at school one day and I found out he tried to kill himself. Three weeks later he came back and said that he had been put in the hospital and a mental institution or drug rehab or something. I was like, he'll be all right, and I gave him a hug when he came back and everything. Two days later he tried to commit suicide again and I haven't seen him since. He's in Massachusetts with his dad.

How did that affect you? "It hit me pretty hard. I felt like it was my fault since I didn't do nothing to help him. I felt like I should have talked to him because I had a lot in common with him." What, I questioned, did she have in common? "Because I was suicidal. That's just something I was doing before I met him and then I found out that he tried it, and I felt like I could have related to him a little bit better, but I didn't." Turns out Joy had seen a psychiatrist to whom she was referred by a school guidance counselor, but that, she said, was not helpful. "I just didn't feel like talking about it with him," she said. Joy has a couple of friends who have tried to commit suicide, and she herself has tried many times. "I overdosed on a bunch of stuff once, pills or some prescription of my mom's, I took the whole bottle. It didn't work. I just went to sleep for a long time." Apparently nobody in her family realized anything had happened. "No, they never found out." How did she feel, I asked, trying to kill herself when nobody even knew? "I think," she admitted, "it's pretty pitiful." A few other times she said people knew something was wrong with her and tipped off the school counselor, who notified her parents. What did her parents say? "They're hurt. They think that they're doing something wrong, and it really doesn't have nothing to do with them, it's just me." What does she mean "it's just me"? "A lot of times," she explained matter-of-factly, "I don't feel like I want to be here, here on earth. I get hyper a lot and then it goes straight downhill and I'm depressed. A lot of times I don't feel like I oughta be here, I'm not worth nothing or whatever."

I asked Joy whether she talks to people about her feelings and problems. Her other suicidal friends talk about *their* feelings, she says, but she does not share her own feelings with them. "I hear everybody's problems. But I write poems and short stories and that's how I get it out. I've got probably over 300 of them." Someday, she says, she wants to publish what she has written because it might help other teens: "There's a lot of people out there I know are the same way and feel the same way I do about stuff." But she has never shown her work to any of her teachers. "It's too personal," she says. Anyway, "I just feel if anybody looked at me one way they would know that I was trying to kill myself, just by seeing how I act." But she says she also doesn't want people to know. "I just don't feel like it really applies to them. I don't know." Would she like to change and be a happier person? "I don't care," she replies without feeling.

I ask if she is religious in any way. "I was a Christian for a long time, but right now, I just, I don't believe in nothing right now. I was baptized and pretty much led a Christian life up until ninth grade, when I started doing all that stuff." She says her mom and Rudy consider themselves Christians and attend an independent Baptist church, which Joy also attends about monthly just to keep her parents happy. But she has not told them that she's not a Christian any more. She said she does feel welcomed at church and that the adults there seem pleasant to her. I asked Joy to explain how it was that she decided she was not a Christian. "I don't know, there's just a bunch of different, when I was feeling suicidal and everything, I guess I didn't think God cared that much or it really didn't matter to me if he did, I guess. I just, I'm not, let's see, how I, I don't think I could really lead a Christian life. I'm not strong enough to do that and go out and tell people about that. I can't do that." So, she thinks that being a Christian means behaving in a certain demanding way of life and she realized she couldn't do that? "Yeah, that's pretty much all it was." And it seemed God didn't care for her when she was in trouble? "Well, I think he cared, but it's to the point that I didn't really care whether anybody cared, so." Had she ever felt love from God? "I feel it, it's just I don't want to take part of, I don't know. I think he loves me, but I, I just, it don't really matter to me." Joy then explains that she thinks faith is all about the individual: "People believe what they want to believe and if they get something out of that, then that's what they should believe. That's just not me." She does believe in God, she says: "Just somebody up there watching everything you do." What does God think about her life? "I know he don't like it." Joy also believes God is forgiving. But then she says God is not really a personal being, but more like a cosmic force. It doesn't seem to fit together, I think. Does she feel close to God? "I feel that he's around everybody, but if you choose to block him out, that's your choice, and that's most likely what I do. If I'm drinking or something I push him away. A lot of times I just ignore God."

At this point in the interview, I recalled seeing a locally published Christian newsletter in the funky coffee shop downtown I'd stopped into that morning. One of the newsletter's cover articles, "Are You Lukewarm?," asserted that we are a nation of lukewarm Christians whom, according to the quoted Bible verse, God will "spew out of his mouth." The other cover article's headline, written by someone from Dial-the-Truth Ministries, declared in response to the inquiring letter of an 8-year-old girl named Virginia, "Yes, Virginia, There Is a Hell." The article concluding with the pointed question, "One hundred years from now where will you be?" I started having the feeling, though not the time then to figure it out, that there was some connection between that newsletter's messages and Joy's current spiritual condition.

We moved on. Joy affirmed that she believes in the supernatural and the paranormal. She also has pleasant memories of a week of religious summer camp and of a fun Christian conference or church youth group "lock-in" she had attended. But those were before ninth grade. Now she doesn't read the

Bible or pray or do any other religious practice except occasional church attendance. She has also never heard the phrase “I’m spiritual but not religious.” That idea seemed odd to her. One of her best friends since kindergarten, she notes, is a solid Christian. How, I asked, do they relate? “Every once in a while, like if I’m on the phone cussing and stuff, she’ll tell me to stop cussing and everything. She doesn’t cuss, and she doesn’t drink and she doesn’t do anything bad, she tries to live a life that God would want her to live or whatever.” Another good friend recently converted from Wicca to Christianity but, Joy mentions, she’s still having sex with her boyfriend. Joy said there are religious youth groups in the area that she’s been invited to attend but does not. “I didn’t get along with the people even though they’re Christians or whatever, I just didn’t get along with them too well. I don’t know, I just had differences that they didn’t like me for some reason, so, if somebody don’t like me, I don’t like them, I guess.” Again, however, Joy affirmed, “You can believe whatever you want to believe. Like if somebody wanted to be a witch or something, they could study that and decide what they want to do.” Joy thinks all religions are true, in the sense that there are people who sincerely believe in them, and that’s fine for them. Could someone follow more than one religion? “No, I don’t think you could at the same time. You need to research and find what [one] you want to do.”

When it comes to morality, Joy thinks people usually know what is right and wrong, they just choose to do what they want to. “A lot of times I know something’s wrong but I do it anyway. It’s just what I want to do, not ‘cause anybody tells me to do it.” Joy freely admits lying to her parents, cheating in school, drinking and doing drugs, which she says she knows are wrong. What, I ask, makes them wrong? “ ‘Cause I get in trouble for it.” We go back and forth about morality. She clearly believes certain things are just wrong but cannot explain why they are, what makes them so. It seems in the end the fact that other people think they are wrong is what makes them wrong. Does she ever feel guilty? “Yeah, but most of the time I just ignore it.” Her teachers do not closely watch for cheating. “That’s school for you,” she remarks. And although her parents do get upset when she’s caught doing something bad, they are also inconsistent in disciplining her: “They don’t follow through and soon I’ll go back to what I was doing.”

Joy started drinking alcohol at age 14, she said: “First thing I ever drunk was white lightning, it’s really hard liquor. I had friends that drunk. It was pretty nasty, but I liked the feeling when I drunk it, so. And then I started drinking beer. I’d much rather drink beer than liquor, ‘cause I get sick when I drink liquor.” Joy explains, “Alcoholism runs in my family, bad, so I can drink probably a case before I ever got drunk.” I ask for a clarification. “Yeah,” she explains, “a lot of people have told me that studies or something showed that if it runs in your family you’re more likely to either do it or to have a higher toleration.” But, I ask, if alcoholism runs in the family, wouldn’t she want to avoid drinking? “Nuh-uh, I just don’t care about it.” What about smoking weed? It turns out, I was astounded to hear, that Joy was introduced to marijuana by her friend’s father on the day her own father

died: "The first time I smoked weed was, I went over to my friend's house, as soon as I found out my dad had died, and she and her dad knew my dad, so they knew it had hit me pretty hard and they knew I had been wanting to try smoking weed or whatever, so that was the first time I ever did it, the day I found out he died." The fact that her friend's father smokes pot and offered it to help comfort Joy in her grief did not strike her as remarkable. "Oh yeah, just about everybody I know has either tried it or continuously does it." Lately, however, Joy mostly smokes pot at her 23-year-old boyfriend's house. Don't her parents realize she does this stuff? "No, I guess we just, we got ways." To keep it hidden? "Yeah."

So why, I pressed, *does* she drink and smoke? "Just 'cause I feel like it. I like doing it." I was trying to restrain myself from an all-out psychotherapeutic analysis, but it was becoming clear that Joy's problematic life choices had deep and powerful emotional wellsprings. She was obviously depressed. She said she felt bad about herself, that she feels sad "about every other day." She said she often feels invisible and neglected when she's not with her friends, and that she wished she could lose weight. She has few positive adult relationships and discloses few of her bad feelings to anyone other than a few friends' parents—as likely as not the ones who smoke pot with her as an offer of emotional support. Most of all, the recent death of her father seemed to hang about Joy's life like a ball and chain. She feels angry that she was prevented from visiting him for six years. She feels immensely guilty for not having said goodbye to him before he passed away. But she could hardly admit these feelings. So, I asked, what *does* she do when she gets upset or has a problem? "I either sit down and write, or lay down and go to sleep." Sure, I think, for two days with the help of your mother's prescription drugs. And then nobody realizes it.

Joy's boyfriend, Jim, seven years older than she, seemed to be a bright spot in her life, so I asked more about him. He lives an hour's drive away, works in a factory, and comes to see Joy a few times a week. Joy had seriously dated five or so boys before Jim, some of whom did not turn out well. "A couple of relationships I've had, they really hurt me from some of the stuff that happened. One guy just dated me to be dating but didn't really like me, and another guy when I was 14 loved me so much he was like obsessed and stalking me." But Joy seems very happy about Jim. What do they do when they get together? "Well, he'll come up to the house and he'll sit down and watch TV and I'll sit on his lap and watch TV with him. Mostly just cuddling up or whatever. Mm-mm. I love sitting in his lap. I guess I just feel loved when he holds me like that, shows me how much he loves me." So Jim seems to function as Joy's substitute father, an older man unconsciously serving emotionally in place of the one who was never there with Joy to cuddle affectionately on the sofa in front of the television. But Jim isn't the oldest man Joy has dated. She had been dating Jim's older brother before Jim, but when that brother dumped her, Jim asked her out on a date. She accepted, though for a while felt guilty for dating her former boyfriend's brother. But they're all good friends now, she says.

As I moved through my interview questionnaire, the discussion next gravitated toward the subject of sex. Joy stated her basic sexual morality: "If they want to do it they can do it, whenever they feel they are ready, whenever they want to, I don't know." By "ready," she explained when I probed, she means that people should wait until they're at least 14 years old. Joy and Jim are having sex, mostly at his house. Joy's parents know that she sleeps over at his house regularly, but she also said her parents would be upset if they knew she and Jim were having sex. Well, what do they *think* is happening when you sleep over? "I don't know," she says. "I just think they suspect it, probably, but they don't want to say nothing till they catch us or whatever." Joy said she first had sexual intercourse a year before, at age 15, with Jim's brother: "I was at his house one day and we was hanging out and his parents were outside. We were just kissing or whatever and things got carried away, it was real quick. I didn't even think about his parents being right there. I was fine with it, 'cause if I had wanted to stop it, I would have stopped." Joy says she does think about pregnancy and STDs, but concludes, "I make sure whoever is with me has a condom on." Pregnancy is apparently common among her classmates ("Yeah, and the father's usually long gone"), but she herself wants to graduate high school, get a local job, marry Jim, and eventually have children. Joy then told a story about a girl she knows who has lots of sex with many different people who she doesn't have any relationships with. Joy thinks that is wrong because it is just using people for sex. Why, I then ask, does she think her peers are having sex? "I don't know, I guess it just makes them happy." She insists there is no social pressure involved. Joy also reports that many teens, especially boys, view pornography, especially on the Internet, and they brag about it at school. "I just think it's stupid," she says. "It don't make me angry, that's just what they want to do, but I just think it's dumb that they be watching somebody on a video like that."

It was almost noontime and Joy's stomach was growling. We closed with a few questions about the future. She said she does not think about the future much, but when she does it involves "probably getting married and stuff like that." What does she want out of marriage? "I just want to be happy and I guess we'll have kids, but that's later on, down the road." How does she think her life will turn out? "I don't know, I kind of fear it because I don't know what's gonna happen." Neither do I, I think. She just wants to be happy—not too much for a kid to ask for.

We emerge from the library and Rudy is waiting in his car. He had run some errands during the interview and was enjoying the sunshine. He joked that Joy was probably now going to go shopping to spend the \$30 incentive I had just paid her for her time and effort to do the interview. Joy grinned slightly. I think: Who knows what she'll save it to spend on later? We say good-bye and part.

During my two-hour drive to my next interview at a Pizza Hut, I decompressed from my interview with Joy. I was grateful that she had honestly shared with me some of the feelings and behaviors that she normally kept so carefully hidden from most adults. I also felt depressed about the many layers

of loss and pain and confusion in her life. So sad. I was worried that Joy's boyfriend, Jim, may be less serious about Joy than she was about him. I felt unhappy to be living in a culture that placed such a premium on certain attractive appearances, especially for women, so that Joy, who did not enjoy external beauty, would certainly be disadvantaged in life as a result. As a sociologist of religion, I was also perplexed and confused that a child raised by Christian parents in a Baptist church seemed to have understood so little of the Christian message. Had Joy simply never absorbed the Christian gospel preached in her church? Or was this church not even teaching its own faith tradition's message of God's compassion, grace, and forgiveness, and a calling to become a loved child of God? Driving down more winding roads, I hoped Joy wouldn't run across the newsletter about hell and God spewing out the lukewarm that I had picked up downtown. Mostly, I hoped that someone would come along in Joy's life who could help her deal constructively with her loss, guilt, disappointments, and what seemed to be a desperate yearning to be held tenderly by someone trustworthy, who would assure her that she is indeed much loved and unconditionally embraced. She really needs that, I thought. But I was a sociological researcher, not a counselor or pastor, and I had a Pizza Hut to find.

LOSS AND REDEMPTION

Later that summer, I was again sitting in a car in a parking lot waiting to meet and interview another 16-year-old girl in another public library staff room. Only this time, I was in a medium-size city in a Southwestern state. It was the height of summer, so I squeezed my rental car under the shade of a tree. I was here to interview a girl named Kristen, who proved to have a story quite different from Joy's.

Kristen, her mother, and I met on the sidewalk in front of the library. We went through the introductions routine with which I had become familiar over the course of many interviews that summer. Kristen's mother, like some who came with their teenagers to meet me before interviews, was there in part to make sure I was a bona fide researcher and not a wacko child abductor posing as a sociologist. She wanted to hear a bit more of my story. I showed her my university ID card. She seemed assured, but said she would be staying in the library building, reading.

Kristen and I set up for the interview in the staff meeting room. I gave her the standard ground rules for the interview. Then, just as quickly as in Joy's interview, a sad childhood story began to unfold. When Kristen was 6 years old and living in California, I learned, her father separated from her mother and shortly thereafter committed suicide. Not only that, but it was Kristen and her mother and four brothers and sisters who were the ones who found him dead on a bed with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Kristen's father had been temporarily staying at a friend's house who was on vacation. One morning when he did not show up for an arranged time to take Kristen and her siblings to an amusement park, Kristen's mother and

the kids drove over to where he was staying. Kristen recalled: “The door was open so we went into this room and he looked like he was sleeping, so I asked my mom if I could wake him up and she said okay. So we went over to wake him up and then I saw a phone in the bed with him and my brother saw a gun and my mom saw blood. She told us to get out of the house, so we ran out but I ran back in to get my shoes. I remember going in there. He looked like he was sleeping.” Oh, boy, I thought. “It caused us a lot of grief because he did that,” Kristen said. “I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, thinking that I was in for another case of troubled family, traumatic loss, at-risk childhood, and bad teen outcomes.

But Kristen’s story unfolded quite differently. She explained, “It was something tragic, and now when I look at it I’m just like, ‘wow that was pretty bad,’ and people were saying like we were going to go off the deep end and that we kids needed counseling. But you know, God used it in a great way and to shape my mom.” Although Kristen’s family had been Christian all her life, this event seems to have been a religious turning point: “My mom then just really trusted in God and went to the Word [the Bible] and then two years later she took us out of school and home-schooled us for three years and we did some really great curriculum that was just all focused around the Bible. She taught us, you know, God is the father to the fatherless and she didn’t let us become depressed and clinging on to what happened. She really kept us going and looking ahead. I think it really helped our family.” Every night, Kristen recalled, she and her mother and siblings had family devotions, reading Psalms and Proverbs from the Bible. Her single-mother family did not have much money. But according to Kristen, her mother’s faith and determination and their family’s church involvements made a major difference in her life. And what a life. Kristen was perhaps the most well-adjusted, mature, civically involved, compassionate, and religiously serious teenager I interviewed the entire summer. Throughout the interview, I kept thinking to myself that I must be missing something, that Kristen could simply not be as together a person as she seemed to be, that perhaps Kristen was living in some kind of emotional denial or had been brainwashed into a repressive, straitlaced existence. There might be something like that going on to some extent, but I did not see or hear a trace of it, even as I probed. Although many would not share her conservative religious views, Kristen was nonetheless, as far as I could tell, simply a down-to-earth, fun, clear-thinking, religiously committed, generally impressive kid.

How had Kristen’s life unfolded? Kristen’s mother seems to have taken a strong leadership role in encouraging and guiding her family after her father’s death, a major aspect of which was grounding the family in a religious tradition and church community. Since the suicide, Kristen’s family has been deeply involved in church, Sunday school, Wednesday-night children’s church activities, vacation Bible school, and more. Kristen’s mother also “decided to put aside traditional dating altogether” and not rush to get remarried, but to focus first on her children’s well-being. By Kristen’s account, her mother has also effectively combined a close, warm, compassionate relationship with very

high expectations and supervision of Kristen's attitudes and behaviors. Kristen says her relationship with her mother is "good, I tell her everything. And we pretty much agree on the same things 'cause she raised me, and on most things I can't find anything to contradict [her on], even though sometimes I try." She laughs. Does she feel close to her mom? "Yeah, I do feel close to her." Isn't there anything, I inquire, that she would not talk with her mother about? "No, not really. I mean, sometimes I think, 'well I'm gonna keep this one secret,' but it all comes out." Kristen also seems to relate well with her siblings: "I get along with them good. I mean, I share with my sister a lot, just like I share with my mom, and I'll bring them to events and stuff that I go to." Kristen says that, overall, her family relationships are "positive and happy."

A few years before our interview, Kristen's mother's brother put Kristen's mother in touch with his own wife's brother, a mail carrier living in a faraway state, whose wife had recently died of cancer. Kristen recalls: "So he gave her a call and they just kept talking on the phone. He came down and visited and we went up and visited, at which point he proposed to her. So she found a guy that had character and was committed to family, you know, and her five kids didn't faze him. And he had been through hard times, too, 'cause his wife had died, and so we became attached to him immediately." And how, I asked, does Kristen get along with her new stepfather? "It's good, I mean I haven't grown up with him but we're good friends and I call him 'Dad' and we joke around. He's adopted us now so we're legally his kids. So that's cool." When I ask Kristen who are the people in the world or in history she most admires, she answers, "I admire my mom for her courage, 'cause I know what she's been through and I was, like, 'wow, you know that can be a lesson.' And I guess I admire my dad, too, because he's been through hardships, losing his wife."

Of her religious faith, Kristen says, "I'm just a Christian, that's it." She and her family are deeply involved in a small Southern Baptist church. What specifically does she believe religiously? "I believe that Jesus is God's Son and that he came and he died for me and for everyone else because we're all sinners and that he didn't stay dead but he rose again and he wants us to come live with him and we just need to admit that we're sinners and believe that he came and died on the cross and rose again and just choose to follow him." Okay. Who or what, I then ask, is God? "He's everything," she replies. "He's a father, like I learned, even though you may not have a dad, he's still a father, he disciplines like a father, he's a good friend, he's a provider, he cares. He is a merciful God, but he is also just." Kristen says she definitely feels close to God: "It's kind of, you know he's there, you know he's watching over you, it's great but you [also] know that there are going to be hard times and that he's still there then." I ask Kristen how she learned all this. "I grew up in a Christian home and my parents, they taught me this, they live it out every day to me in their lives. And watching how God has worked in other people's lives and how he got my mom through stuff. And church and Sunday school and seeing other people there, listening to the pastor's message. And

reading his Word, being in it daily and finding out stuff.” Her family still has religious devotions together: “Now everyone’s running [busy but] we make time for family devotions. Before we go off to school in the mornings, my mom, while we’re all sitting at the kitchen table, she’ll read a devotional book to us.” Kristen also owns her own “chronological Bible,” which takes the reader through the entirety of the Scriptures in one year. She reads it every night before going to bed. Kristen seems to love her church youth group, led by a volunteer youth pastor, for its fellowship, sharing, encouragement, and teaching from the Bible. Without youth group, something would definitely feel missing in life, she says. In addition to attending church and reading the Bible, Kristen says she prays daily, takes communion at church, and is involved in numerous Christian ministries.

Kristen believes in divine miracles, the supernatural, angels, and demons, although she has never had a direct experience with any of them. I asked whether she ever has doubts about her faith. “I have,” she reported. “I have wondered if I’m really saved and if I died would I go to heaven and is there really a God. But even if there’s not, I don’t think there’s anything else better to believe ’cause then you’ve lost hope. Sometimes I wonder, there’s so many other religions and they all claim to be true and I claim mine to be true and so, you know, what’s right? And then I think, whatever it is, [Christianity] is the best that I’ve heard.” Kristen has never heard the phrase “spiritual but not religious” and does not know what it means, but thinks it might have to do with New Age beliefs. She does not believe other religions are true but are, rather, misleading. “Those who trust in Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior will go to heaven when they die and those who don’t will go to hell.” Kristen also says that it is wrong for Christians to try selectively to customize their own faith: “If you pick and choose you’re not being consistent and then who’s to say what you pick is true?” She thinks if you’re going to be a Christian, you need to believe the whole Christian thing.

Kristen observes that her faith has a real influence on her life, that she is against a compartmentalized religious life. “I don’t think it’s a separate thing, ’cause I think it should be an everyday thing, an all-the-time thing. It’s not like I stop being a Christian.” According to Kristen, she is earning all A’s at school and her faith affects her attitude about schoolwork: “I care about doing well in school ’cause it gives me something to aim for, gives me goals, now I can practice achieving my goals—you do everything your best for the Lord whether or not it’s anything [important].” Faith also affects how she cares for and uses her body, she says: “Our body, if you’re saved, we are living examples that you have Christ living in you and so you want to be a good example for that and also our bodies are not our own anymore.” Kristen also says religious faith affects her family life: “It has a lot to do with how we treat each other, by forgiving one another and holding each other accountable—that’s a big thing in our family—my sisters and I calling each other on weak points but also encouraging each other.” I asked for an example. “Yeah, well, like my sister Julia was with this person who was not a very good friend to her and we confronted her on this, ‘You know, Julia, this

isn't very good, look at how this is going, this is not biblical, it's against God's word.' We didn't all bombard her at the same time, but you know she realized it and now they're not friends anymore." The connection between religious faith and the living of a particular kind of life was also evident in much more of what Kristen had to say. For example, for Kristen, divine revelation and faith define morality. "People know what's right and wrong," she says, "they just choose to do the wrong and then laugh at it like it's a joke." So where, I ask, does morality come from? "God. God's word is truth. In the Bible, I believe that's it." But what if people don't believe in the Bible? "Well, we have law here, too. And I think there's a sense of guiltiness [conscience]." I told Kristen that I had just read in the paper about a man who had tried to kill his pregnant wife because he was afraid she would find out he was addicted to pornography, observing that he didn't seem to have much of a conscience. "No," she replied, "no, they have a conscience, they just choose to ignore it. They've done so many things that I think it's just become hardened." What about the idea that morality is relative? "That's total baloney. There is a moral right and wrong, some people just don't want to have to answer to anyone so that's why they say that—there's no accountability when you have that."

Does Kristen ever do things wrong that make her feel guilty? "I know I've done wrong, I'm not perfect, and I sin, I do bad stuff, but nothing that's outstanding like drugs or something like that. But sometimes I will lie to my parents just to get around things and I know that's wrong." What does Kristen do with her guilty feelings? "I go to my parents and I say, 'Mom and Dad, look, I was wrong about this and I lied to you about this. Will you forgive me?'" Then what happens? "They say, 'all right,' and there's a punishment if there needs to be, like grounding me. Then they'll say, 'thank you, I'll forgive you.'" And the guilt feelings? "It goes away. And I also need to ask God to forgive me, too, 'cause the sin wasn't just against my parents." But why, I press, tell your parents things they don't need to know that will only create trouble? "I don't know, just being in a close relationship with my parents I would tell them." Kristen also thinks dishonesty and cheating are bad because they disrespect authority and lead to bad reputations, whereas honesty "shows [adults] that you can be respected, that you can be trusted."

Kristen has never tried cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs and has no interest in them. "It's bad for you, like brains are fried, plus," she says laughing, "I have asthma so it will just kill me sooner." So why, I ask, do some of her peers do such unhealthy things? "What I hear is it gives you release or peace or whatever. But there's so much better ways to find peace." Like? "Like, um, reading a Bible, finding a good church to go to, I mean, when you have a relationship that's right with God you're gonna find peace." Kristen's beliefs and attitudes themselves also seem to protect her among her peers from information and possible temptations: "People, they tell me, 'ah, she's got a virgin mind so don't tell her anything.'" So I know there's stuff that goes on [among peers] that I don't know about." Kristen goes out to parties, but she first has to call and confirm for her parents that other parents will be home

while the party is on. She goes out to and rents movies, but not R-rated ones. And she can stay out late, past her parents' bedtime, and spend the night at a friend's house, but she says she always (eventually) tells the truth about what she did and when she finally came home.

Kristen attends a large Christian school that enrolls Christian and non-Christian students. Her family does not have much money, but they scrape together what they need to pay the tuition. Some of Kristen's church friends attend the same school, so her important social relationships involve a relatively high degree of institutional overlap. Most of her friends are Christians, so they talk about faith matters, such as what different Bible verses mean. Through these church and school connections, Kristen reports, her parents also know most of her friends' parents: "Very well, really well. My dad knew some of my friends' parents even before I moved here. We go to school sports and my dad's a big sports fan so he'll discuss sports with all the dads. And through church, too, they know some of my good friends' parents through church." Through all of these overlapping network ties, Kristen agrees, her parents are able to keep fairly good tabs on what she and her friends are up to. "I know they trust me," Kristen says, "but they [also] keep track of my behavior and [say], 'no, you can't do that' and I'm like, 'why?' and they're like, ' 'cause your attitude isn't right.' And I'm like, 'how did they know that?' If I was involved in something that was bad, they would know it, they would ask me about it." Kristen says she also knows her teachers and adults at church well: "I'm good friends with my teachers, I really like being around them. And at church I'm good friends with the parents there. They're an encouragement, I just talk to them and be friendly." She says if she were in a crisis she would definitely feel comfortable calling on adults at her church for help.

Kristen says she thinks a lot of teenagers these days are "just dumb. A lot of them don't listen to their parents and a lot don't have parents they can listen to that are gonna give good advice either. They're in dumb dating relationships and do and say dumb things." She says she knows of teens whose parents trust them with whatever they do, but in fact the parents actually simply don't care whether they're drinking, doing drugs, and hanging out with their girlfriends in the middle of the night. "These kids wouldn't be doing this if they had parents like mine, but not everyone's like my parents." Kristen says her parents prevent her from doing certain things that she does want to do, like hang out with certain friends, but "if my parents don't want me hanging out with them then it's probably a good thing." But doesn't she ever feel rebellious or want to be wild or free, to break out and assert herself? "Not really. Sometimes I tell my parents that they never let me do anything I want to do. And they say, 'Okay, Kristen, [do] whatever you want to do that we haven't let you.' And then I think about it and whatever comes to mind is something that I hear about later wasn't good anyway."

Many of Kristen's views have a conservative edge that many people would think prudish. For instance, she seems much concerned about the "bad language" some of her peers use. She is bothered by other girls who dress like

boys, in baggy jeans and chains: "I'm just like, 'be feminine! You're not a guy, get over it.'" She does not want to start dating until she is ready to get married. She believes in trusting in and submitting to her parents: "I'm pretty much looking at their perspective. I've been trying to do that lately, seeing how they would feel and how I would if I had a daughter." And she likes classical music, watches Shirley Temple and other classic movies, and frequents a video shop called Clean Flicks that carries a line of videos that has edited out bad language, violence, and sex scenes from otherwise good movies. But she says that, for herself, she feels not the least bit odd or left out of mainstream American youth culture. "I think *they're* the ones missing out," she exclaims, laughing. "I don't think what I'm doing is wrong." At the very least, I think to myself, she's not insecure.

The number of organized and volunteer activities in which Kristen is involved is astonishing. She runs on the school track team. She is involved in Honor Society at school. She participates in the local 4-H Club. She is involved in her church's youth group, which studies the Bible and has fun but also volunteers to cook at the local soup kitchen. She has also gone on mission trips organized by her youth pastor to far-away cities to volunteer to sort donated clothes for the homeless and to help in soup kitchens. She plays piano at church. She teaches summer vacation Bible school with her friends at church. And she helps do a child evangelism fellowship program with her older sister. During the summer she also runs Five-Day-Clubs: "It's like VBS [vacation Bible school] in someone's backyard, like with people from another church or in [Mexican farmworker] migrant housing; you meet one kid and get a bunch of kids together to do it. I like doing that during the summer." She's also involved in a "water bottle ministry": "During sports, after our home varsity games, we go and hand out water bottles to the other team with Bible verses on the bottle of water." And she is involved in a school-based program called Teen Coalition, which advocates against early teen involvement in drugs and sex. Despite the fact that Teen Coalition encourages teen abstinence from sex and drugs only "until teens are 'ready' or 'can handle it'" —which Kristen thinks is "dumb" in its vagueness about boundaries—she still actively promotes the program as well intentioned and worth supporting even if not perfect or fully Christian. So why is Kristen so involved in so many organizations and programs? "I think it's something that a lot of people should do," she explains. "You're kind of obliged to do it because where would you be if you didn't have any help either? Helping one another, I mean, it's biblical, how can it not be? And so it's not just like, 'Oh, if it feels good, do it.'"

It is clear that Kristen is no angel, but a normal, imperfect teen in various ways. She says she whines a lot to try to get her way. She struggles with obeying her parents. She would rather be out playing with her friends than unloading the dishwasher. She thinks (without reason) that she's somewhat overweight but struggles to articulate why that bothers her: "Sometimes I wish that I looked better or were skinnier, because when you see other girls and stuff and they can wear like really short shorts. I mean not that I have

a desire to wear short shorts around to show off my body, but just because I would feel good about myself. Yeah, I think I just [would] have more self-esteem, but not that I'm lacking in self-esteem right now. I just, I think what the goal is, is to be in shape, so that's pretty much it. I'm exercising less this year so I'm worried I'm gonna be totally out of shape." And sometimes she gets tired of helping other people through her volunteering. But she recurrently comes back to her commitment to live out the life she believes is right. What, I ask, does she do when she gets upset or has a problem? "I usually think it through, think about why I'm upset about it, is there any point to being upset. Or I like go talk to my mom or one of my sisters or brothers. Sometimes I'll tell my friends."

Kristen has no desire to date at this point. "I know I'm not mature enough to handle it," she says. "I've seen it happen, people think they're perfect for each other and three months later they don't work out, so it's a dumb thing to do right now." Her view on not dating until she's ready to get married seems influenced in part by her mother's example, but also by an older sister who was once hurt badly in a dating relationship. Kristen elaborated, "You kind of leave a piece of yourself with everyone you date, you give away something of yourself or share with them a lot of stuff. And then you marry someone else, maybe someone from school after dating like 13 other people in the same school who everyone involved knows, it's kind of weird." I asked Kristen if she had read *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, a controversial evangelical book advocating abstaining from dating and a return to older models of courtship. "Right, I read that, and I didn't really agree with a lot of things in it." Well, I thought, at least she's not swallowing any ideology uncritically. Kristen then went on to tell me about a friend of hers who is not dating anyone because she shares Kristen's views, but whose *parents* are actually pressuring her to date. I asked her if dating was perhaps valuable for helping to figure out who you are, what you like, who would be good to marry, as a learning experience. "Um, I think you can find out who you are without finding a guy," she replied.

Predictably, by this point, when it came to sex, Kristen's view was "no sex before marriage." This, she said, is simply Christian teaching on the matter. "Marriage and sex is a great gift God gave us," she explained, "so I think [sex] should only be used then, when you're married." We discussed what physical intimacies might or might not be appropriate before marriage, and she emphasized her belief in the importance of clear boundaries: "Boundaries should be set because if you don't have boundaries, if you don't set goals then there's nothing to achieve and you will just fall. I think I might be interested in doing what my older sister did, she set certain guidelines, she sat down with her guy and they wrote stuff out that they could only go so far. I don't know if they even hold hands but they do give each other side hugs." What should people do, then, I probed, about the physical desires they have before marriage? "I don't think it's a sin to like others, that's how God made us, you know, you're gonna have those emotions, it's what you

choose to do with them [that matters]." Kristen said she didn't think she would want even to get into heavy kissing before marriage.

When it comes to media consumption, Kristen says she does not watch a lot of television, "just 'cause so much of it is perverted and the commercials are perverted, just gross, nasty, like the innuendos. And I have younger sisters and brothers and I think it would be a bad example for them, and I could probably be doing better things." She reports that her parents are strict in monitoring their kids' television watching, and that they do not subscribe to cable, so only receive about six channels to watch anyway. Kristen listens to contemporary Christian music on the radio, and composes her own songs to sing on the piano. She also has her own cell phone, but mostly, she says, for safety reasons, because she gets lost a lot while driving. Her family's dial-up Internet service is slow, so she doesn't use it a lot. She writes just as many letters to friends as she does e-mails, she says. As to pornography, "I don't think that's something we should be into, I don't agree with it, it's like fantasizing."

By this time, we're coming down the homestretch of the interview. Kristen tells me that even if she could change her life she would keep it just as it is, "'cause even the bad things that may have happened they're used [by God] to shape my life." What, I ask, is the meaning or purpose of life? "I think we're here because God put us here and our ultimate goal I think is to tell other people about God." And what does she want to do with her life? "I think I might want to be a teacher, I don't know, I really want to impact [other people's] lives, but I'm not really knowing how yet." Does she want to get married? "It would be something good to do, not that I'm dependent on another person, because I think it's a good thing to be able to survive on your own without another person, but to have someone that I could work with and enjoy." How does she feel about the future? "I'm not really worried, I just think about finishing my junior year, then my senior year, then I'll think about college." And what does she hope to be like religiously when she's 25 years old? "Um, I hope to be still growing and learning stuff and [relating to] God everyday and still just progressing."

We wrapped up the interview, I packed up my recording equipment, and we went to find Kristen's mother. I thanked Kristen and her mother again for their help and wished Kristen all the best.

Two nights later, just before it was time for me to head back to North Carolina, I caught the opening night of the big rodeo that had come to town. The cowgirl show, calf roping, bucking broncos, and bull riding were a great ending to an intense but successful interview trip out West. The crowd was having a great time and so was I. Halfway through the evening, my eye caught sight of someone who looked familiar, coming up my aisle. Ah. It was Kristen, wearing a green 4-H volunteer's apron and lugging a large tray of soft drinks she was selling to raise money for 4-H. I said "Hi" and bought a Coke. She smiled, blushing somewhat. But we said nothing more. Sociologists have got to protect their interviewees' confidentiality, after all.